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Congress's Historians Keep Record Straight

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Want to know which senators have received the Nobel Peace Prize? Or who was the first African American to serve in the House? The answer is likely to be found in the historical offices that both chambers maintain, each with voluminous information about Congress.

The Senate Historical Office, http://www.senate.gov/learning/learn_history.html, established in 1975, collects and maintains biographical information on former senators, more than 30,000 Senate-related photographs and illustrations, oral history interviews, and records of important statistics, dates and events in the life of the venerable institution.

The office's seven historians field inquiries from senators and their staffs, scholars, journalists and the general public. "The focus is on the institutional development of the Senate," said Richard A. Baker, 67, a historian and the only director the office has ever had.

The House has two official keepers of records and information. House Historian Robert V. Remini came on board in May 2005 after a gap of nearly 10 years in official House history-keeping. The historian's seat had been empty after the hiring and rapid firing of Christina Jeffrey by then-Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.).

The House also has an Office of History and Preservation <http://www.clerk.house.gov/art%5Fhistory/house%5Fhistory/>, part of the clerk's office. Farar Elliott and her colleagues are responsible for House artifacts and archives.

Some of the most frequent questions are about items such as the House mace and the silver inkwell stand that has been brought onto the House floor "every day since about 1820," she said.

The creation of the Senate historical office came right after the Watergate scandal and just before the nation's bicentennial celebration, at a time of heightened consciousness about the institutional history of Congress, Baker said.

Then-Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield (D-Mont.) agreed to create the office at the urging of historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. Schlesinger argued that the State Department and the military had offices to preserve their history, and the Senate should, too.

Senators' papers are their own property, to handle as they wish, Baker said. But committee records belong to the government and eventually must be sent to the National Archives.

"Sometimes those records grow legs and walk off to another location," Baker said. "And the more important the records, the more likely it is to happen. We've tried to prevent that as much as we could."

In the House, Remini said he and his staff field historical queries from members of Congress, many of them referrals of questions from constituents.

"Very often, they want to know who occupied their office in the past, who was a member of the House, especially if he was a very distinguished individual," he said.

Remini said he is charged with educating the public as well as members of Congress and their staffs.

"I have found, to my great surprise, that the American people don't really know how their government functions," he said. "Most schools have American history as a requirement, and you think they'd learn something, and they may have known at one time. But some of them don't even know what century the Civil War occurred or how laws are passed."

For the record, four men who served in the Senate were Nobel Peace Prize winners, including Al Gore, this year's recipient, who represented Tennessee from 1985 to 1993. The others were Tennessee Democrat Cordell Hull (1945), Minnesota Republican Frank Kellogg (1929) and New York Republican Elihu Root (1912). Only Root, who served from 1909 to 1915, received the award while in office.

And the first African American to serve in the House was Joseph Rainey, a South Carolina Republican, who began his term on Dec. 12, 1870.